

THE WALL WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

I. THE STUDY AREA - 38,000 acres.

The Wall WSA (NV-060-163) is located in northeastern Nye County approximately 75 miles east of Tonopah, Nevada. The WSA includes 38,000 acres of BLM lands. The WSA boundaries are unnamed dirt roads on all sides except the east side, where the boundary follows a drainage and then traverses along the contour line to Stone Corral well. The WSA lies in the Pancake Range adjacent to the Palisade Mesa WSA and includes a portion of Railroad Valley.

There were four alternatives analyzed in the EIS; an all wilderness alternative, a no wilderness alternative, a partial wilderness alternative which is the recommendation of this report where 30,320 acres would be designated as wilderness and 7,680 acres released for uses other than wilderness, and a second partial alternative which would involve combining the Wall and Palisade Mesa WSAs and designating 113,870 acres as wilderness and releasing 23,680 acres for uses other than wilderness.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 30,320 acres recommended for wilderness 7,680 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation for this WSA is to designate 30,320 acres as wilderness and release 7,680 acres for uses other than wilderness. The partial wilderness alternative, the recommendation of this report, would be implemented in a manner which would utilize all practical means to avoid or minimize environmental impacts.

The 30,320 acres recommended for wilderness designation contains the formation called "The Wall" for which the WSA was named. The vivid examples of volcanic processes present within this part of the WSA, along with the wilderness values of naturalness, solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation opportunities make it a prime candidate for wilderness designation.

The Wall named for its sheer vertical face, is an unusual volcanic formation. It lies at the eastern edge of a larger volcanic field. The Wall formation is derived from volcanic ash and magma which solidified. Over millennia, the surrounding softer ground eroded away leaving the vertical cliffs which guard access to the mesa central to the WSA. The black rock of the Wall formation extends an imposing barrier along the northern, eastern, and southern boundaries of the mesa. The top of the mesa is composed of a labyrinth of erosion gullies and washes. Pinyon pine trees form into scattered groves shading the gullies from above and combining with the dark rock to present a uniquely colored geologic mosaic. The vertical perspective created by the Wall gives the impression of an impenetrable fortress looming over the flat sands and playas of Railroad Valley. Vegetation within the WSA is sparse. The alluvial fans to the south are dominated by desert shrub communities while the top of the mesa is limited to scattered pockets of pinyon pine and shrubs.

The high plateau scattered with the multitude of washes and draws provides excellent screening throughout the area. The wild untrammelled setting provides for excellent opportunities in recreation. The unique geology of the area provides visitors with a setting unlike any other.

Designation of the recommended areas as wilderness would create very few conflicts with other competing resources. Further enhancing its manageability is the nature of the area: steep cliffs comprised of rugged rock formations surrounded by alluvial and colluvial benches of loose sand - characteristics that would serve to make the area largely self-protecting.

The 7,680 acres not recommended for wilderness designation are the alluvial fans that extend into Railroad Valley on the east. This area has existing vehicle ways and gentle terrain with easy access to motor vehicles.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The Wall WSA has retained its naturalness with negligible human imprints observable from within the WSA. The area recommended for wilderness is in virtually pristine condition. The area consists of a series of high mesas that rise 600 to 2,000 feet above the surrounding basin floor. Large rock outcrops occur on top of the mesas. The elevation ranges from 4,800 in Railroad Valley to 6,873 feet on top of the highest mesa. The fortress-like affect of the wall has served to preclude development of any type within the central core of the area. The forbidding cliffs and deeply scarred surface of the mesa combine to enhance the primitive feeling of the WSA.

The vegetation consists of plants of the northern desert shrub community with some juniper trees interspersed between the rock outcrops on top of the mesas.

Five miles of vehicle ways are found in the Railroad Valley portion of the WSA. One mile of fences is located in the northern and western parts of the WSA. A water tank and trough are located inside the western boundary of the WSA. The total acreage involved in all these features is less than five acres. The area generally appears to have been affected by the forces of nature with the imprints of man substantially unnoticeable.

B. Solitude: The Wall WSA provides an outstanding opportunity for solitude. The fortress walls of the mesa gives the visitor an instant feeling of entering into a protected realm. Upon scaling the precipitous cliffs the visitor is transcended into a maze of deeply cut gullies and drainages carved into the same hard black rock comprising the cliffs. Seclusion on the mesa is the rule more than the exception with scattered groves of pinyon trees enhancing the masking affects of the surrounding terrain. The lack of permanent waters would serve to disperse recreational use.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: The Wall WSA offers outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. The unique and imposing geology of the area provides for scenic and imposing landscapes which would lend itself to the rock collector, amateur geologist or photographer. Although the steep cliffs may pose a seemingly insurmountable barrier to many, opportunities for bouldering and limited technical rock climbing abound with numerous chimneys and overhangs to challenge intermediate to advanced climbers. The uniqueness of the terrain will serve as the greatest draw to most visitors, as The Wall WSA provides a landscape unlike any other in Nevada.

Opportunities for recreation in the areas not recommended for wilderness are much lower. The open saltbush bench lands provide some opportunities for easy hiking not available in the recommended portion, but other forms of recreation are adversely affected by the areas lack of variation, seclusion, and vegetation.

D. Special Features: Vivid examples of volcanic processes are present within The Wall WSA. The extensive cliff formations and fortress-like appearance of the area is unique to central Nevada

4. MANAGEABILITY

The Wall WSA is manageable as wilderness. Manageability is enhanced by the lack of private or State inholdings within the WSA.

Management of the area recommended for wilderness would be very easy. Manageability is enhanced by the nature of the area: steep, rugged walls of volcanic rock abruptly rising from the surrounding valleys; characteristics that would cause the area to be largely self-protecting. Those areas not protected by the sheer volcanic cliffs are composed of large expanses of bare rock or heavily rock strewn soil making cross-country

vehicle travel very difficult.

Management of the areas not recommended for wilderness designation which are primarily located along the alluvial fans bordering much of the inner core of mesas would be difficult. Low vegetation cover and gentle terrain provide easy vehicle access.

The Wall WSA has 21 oil and gas leases covering approximately 24,720 acres (most of the eastern half of the WSA). However, due to the low potential for oil and gas, no development is anticipated. The 7,680 acres not recommended for wilderness designation in Railroad Valley have the greatest potential for oil and gas exploration and seismic activities have occurred here. This area contains the vehicle ways, which provide easy motor vehicle access into the area.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The U.S. Geological Survey and Bureau of Mines prepared a mineral assessment for the 30,320 acres of The Wall WSA recommended for wilderness designation concluding: There has been no mining activity in or within two miles of the wilderness study area. No mining claims are present. No metallic mineral resources were identified, however, antimony, copper, gold, lead, silver, and zinc were mined within 15 miles of the study areas but from different geologic environments.

No drilling or oil and gas exploration is known to have occurred within the recommended portion of this wilderness study area. Oil and gas resources are unlikely. Thick sequences of extrusive igneous rocks are not conducive for hydrocarbon accumulation.

Geothermal resources exist along major basin and range faults in Railroad Valley, but are not known to occur within the recommended portion of this wilderness study area.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

Public involvement has occurred throughout the wilderness review process. During the inventory phase, nine comments were received on The Wall WSA, six were in favor and three were opposed.

During formal public review of the draft EIS, a total of ten individuals, a mining organization, and two state agencies commented on The Wall WSA. Seven individuals and two state agencies supported wilderness designation and three individuals and a mining organization supported no wilderness designation.

Reasons for supporting the suitable wilderness designation were: unique volcanic features, low potential for minerals, wonderland of smooth, polished rocks in huge slabs, Southwest's prime raptor area for rare predatory birds.

Reasons for supporting the unsuitable wilderness designation were: enormous mineral and energy potential, low potential but should remain open to exploration.

The State, during its consistency review, concurred with the Preferred Alternative.